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AUTHOR Kraft, Nancy P.; Wheeler, Jim
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ABSTRACT

This case study tells the story of 19 educators and their facilitator who examined the processes and dilemmas of creating a special education curriculum through action research. During the 1994-95 school year, a group of teachers and a principal participated in a year-long project to develop a curriculum around issues of inclusion and transition with the intention of using the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills as a curricular framework. Action research was the method by which teachers studied their own classrooms and determined the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that should be part of the special education curriculum. As the study focused on multiple goals, multiple research methods were used, with the primary method being continuous personal journal keeping. Areas that are discussed include: (1) curriculum development through action research; (2) ways in which the action research experience changed teachers' beliefs about their roles as teachers; (3) ways in which the action research changed teachers' beliefs about students; and (4) reflections on outcomes of the course. The action research project made it evident that when teachers have ownership in conceptualizing and determining curriculum content and processes they will accomplish the intended goals and processes. (Contains 3 tables and 23 references.) (SLD)

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Developing Curriculum Using Action Reserch and Collaborative Inquiry: A Case Study

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Developing Curriculum Using Action Research and Collaborative Inquiry: A Case Study

Nancy P. Kraft, Ph.D. and Jim Wheeler, Ph.D.*

Introduction

This case study chronicles the shared journey of 19 educators and their facilitator, who through a process of action research examined together the possibilities and dilemmas of creating a special education transition curriculum. During the 1994/95 school year a group of special education, general education, and vocational education teachers and one principal participated in a year long project to develop a curriculum around issues of inclusion and transition with the intent to utilize the SCANS Report (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) as a curricular framework. Action research was used as the method for teachers to study their current classroom practices and to determine the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that should be part of a special education transition curriculum.

Schools generally buy a "canned" curriculum and then use traditional staff training/development to teach teachers how to implement the curriculum. Instead, the process model of curriculum development used in this study enabled teachers to explore their beliefs, values, and assumptions about special education students and the ways that they structured learning for these students. This process model also provided teachers with ownership in determining both the content and process of their own curriculum. This paper reports how a process of collaborative inquiry and hermeneutic dialectic impacted the development of a special education transition curriculum. To examine this, the following questions were used:

1. What are the social constructions educators have regarding special education students, specifically teacher beliefs about how these students construct meaning?

2. How do these constructions influence/effect/impact the ways in which educators conceptualize a transition curriculum for special education students?

3. Does action research and dialectic discourse lead to a critical self awareness that allows

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teachers to question their cultural constructions (e.g., beliefs, values, and assumptions) about special education students and the teaching/learning process? Or their own role as teacher researchers?

Overview of Issues Surrounding Transition

According to the Individual's With Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA), transition is defined as an outcome-oriented process, taking into account the individual's interests, needs, and preferences. The Act states that special education programs must address postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. Students age 16 and higher are required to have a written individualized transition plan in addition to their individual education plan (IEP). The transition plan is intended to detail the needs of the student for successful transition to the world outside of school. Problems, however, surround the ways that schools identify the kinds of skills children need to succeed in the "real" world as well as in the design and the ways that schools deliver transition curriculum to students.

Movement toward more inclusive schools and communities, de-institutionalization and revolutionary changes in the workplace skills required for success in the 21st century have transformed what and how we teach students with disabilities and our understandings of what transition entails. This requires that parents and educators make dramatic shifts in their current conceptual models regarding: (1) what is included in state-of-the-art vocational special needs programming/curriculum, and (2) how and where transition skills can best be taught to the mild through moderately disabled students.

There are multiple views regarding the outcomes of a transition curriculum. One view, consistent with SCANS, identifies a list of fundamental workplace skills required for the full range of jobs from the most traditionally unskilled to the top executive positions (Table 1). Kimeldorf (1988) also identified many of these new work place skills brought on by the information age that puts new and additional demands on appropriate inclusionary curriculum and instruction on the mild to moderately disabled individuals. These higher order workplace skills are increasingly

required in what used to be considered semi-skilled jobs such as fast food, building maintenance and basic clerical or secretarial positions.

Table 1
SCANS Fundamental Workplace Skills

Basic Skills	Thinking Skills	Personal Qualities
Reading	Reasoning	Responsibility
Writing	Making decisions	Self esteem
Speaking	Thinking critically	Sociability
Listening	Solving problems	Self-management
Knowing mathematics calculations	Seeing things in the minds eye	Integrity
Mathematics concepts	Knowing how to learn	Honesty

The new work force needs the kinds of skills not capable of being programmed into computers such as creative thinking, problem solving, self management, and the ability to make decisions. Clearly, if individuals with disabilities are going to be competitive in inclusive community-based job markets and thereby reach their full potential for independence they will need to demonstrate some, if not all of these foundation or basic workplace skills.

Another perspective comes from those who believe that the goal of education, especially transition, is to assist students to actively participate in a democratic society. Consistent with this viewpoint is a transition curriculum that centers around skills of self-determination and self-advocacy. A review of the literature points out that teachers who work with special education students haven't generally believed that students with special needs are capable of making choices and constructing meaning. Thus, teaching methods have generally focused on students' passively reproducing knowledge rather than being active constructors of knowledge. If one of the goals of

education is to enable all students to actively participate in a democracy, then processes of education need to be consistent with producing these results. Negotiating the curriculum with students, as advocated by Boomer (1982) is one way to provide students with opportunities to practice skills seen as necessary for participating in a democratic society.

Literature Review

Utilizing a critical social science paradigm this research examines the relationship between teachers' conceptions of special education students and the ways that they structure transition curriculum content and processes. A review of the literature suggests that while the intent of transition curricula is to help students see themselves as learners and problem solvers, and to provide them with necessary skills to become empowered members of society, processes for teaching the curriculum and content of special education curriculum or transition curriculum haven't necessarily been consistent with the intended outcome. If teachers have limited views and expectations of student capabilities regarding knowledge construction, this inevitably influences the content and process of a special education transition curriculum and teachers' interactions with students. Likewise, if teachers have limited views of their own roles and abilities in effecting change and constructing knowledge and meaning, this will also impact resulting curricular decisions.

To study the relationship between these the literature review is organized around five themes:

1. a critique of the traditional functionalist approaches utilized to conceptualize and implement special education and transition curriculum focusing on the fundamental contradictions of positivist solutions to producing holistic outcomes;

2. an analysis of special education practices that have emphasized a student deficit model as opposed to a curriculum deficit model;

3. a review of the inconsistencies and contradictions as conceptualizing transition as a border crossing at the end of a journey rather than transition being viewed as a developmental journey;

4. a critique of processes schools use to implement new curricular approaches and professional development based on a teacher deficit model; and

5. an examination of action research and collaborative inquiry as viable approaches to effecting real and lasting change.

1. Using a functionalist tradition toward holistic outcomes. The theoretical constructs of psychological behaviorism and experimental psychology have dominated the field of education in the twentieth century. Functionalism, as a knowledge tradition, has guided and justified the professional practices and discourse in special education (Skrtic, 1986). The functionalist or micro-objective paradigm views reality from an objectivist point of view and assumes that there is a single social reality to which humans react mechanistically. Functionalism also assumes that social reality is orderly, rational and predictable therefore social and human problems are pathological (Foucault, 1976). Special education has evolved from a functionalist world view which institutionalizes the mutually reinforcing theories of organizational rationality and human pathology.

With industrialization, immigration, and compulsory school attendance, schools were confronted with large numbers of students who were difficult to teach in the traditional classroom. Drawing on social constructions grounded in functionalism and the rationality of organizations and pathology of "defective" students, the problem of school failure was reframed as two interrelated problems--inefficient (nonrational) organizations and defective (pathological) students (Skrtic, 1995). As special education evolved, inefficient organizations (schools) were brought under more bureaucratic regulations and the "defective" students were subject to the scrutiny of a range of professionals who sought to sort, select and re-teach students. A bits-and-pieces behavioral paradigm using task analysis and measurable objectives evolved which de-contextualized learning even further for students who were already struggling in the curriculum of general education (Heshusius, 1995).

Transitions have become the watchword of special education in the 90s. Transition from school to work and adult life have become the focus of attention in the field since studies sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education indicated a growing number of students were not able

to perform in the world beyond the classroom. Guided by its functionalist traditions, the field of special education has made transition yet another behavioral objective with the introduction of yet another form to be completed (Individualized Transition Plan). The efficiency and rationality of the organization and structural-bureaucracy have been intensified with the edict that "individual transition plans" must be written during "transition plan meetings." Despite these efforts, there has been little improvement in the degree to which students get and keep jobs after school and perhaps the best that can be said is that special education is now documenting its failures more thoroughly (Ferguson and Ferguson, 1995).

Clearly the SCANS report indicates that the skills needed for success in the 21st century world of work will not come from an instructional design paradigm that fragments and de-contextualizes knowledge. Indeed, successful job performance at all levels requires that all students, not just an elite minority, access what has traditionally been high status knowledge (Oakes, 1985). A fundamental contradiction is that the prevailing instructional design and delivery paradigm of special education does not provide students with access to so called "high status" knowledge such as critical thinking, problem solving, drawing conclusions, making generalizations, or evaluating or synthesizing knowledge. The discontinuity between the basic assumptions and beliefs that ground special education and the "new higher order basic skills," self advocacy and negotiating skills needed to succeed in the world beyond the classroom creates a dilemma that must be addressed if more successful school to work transitions are going to be realized.

2. Student deficit vs. curriculum deficit models of special education curriculum. The genealogy of special education as a fix for defective general education classrooms made it difficult for it to participate in the curriculum reform movement. The national school reform initiatives have been more directed at the capable student who could, with the right reforms, succeed in school.

With an increased "discovery" of more disabilities and various constituencies who lobby

for their official recognition as so called "handicapping conditions," one special education contribution to the reform movement might be characterized as reducing the number of students who would be characterized as "normal learners." Special education was viewed by some as a means of reducing the variance of the population of general education learners and, in some cases, increasing the odds that a class or school will increase their standardized test scores when they are "exempted" from the tests. These conclusions are supported by the fact that the percentage of students who are placed in special education services has steadily increased in most states over the past ten years. In the state of Kansas, for example, it is not uncommon to find schools that have 12% up to 18% of their students categorized as eligible for special education. Nearly 80% of such categorized students are identified as having mild learning disabilities or other so called "mild" disabilities.

For example, the movement to make the social construction "attention deficit disorder" a new category of disability under the IDEA has been strong and persistent for the past ten years. This trend toward increasing the number of disability categories so that increased numbers of student's learning can be made pathological is a logical response for the rational-functionalist special education system.

Special education's individual focus on pathologies and labels has isolated it from concerns with the general education curriculum and has resulted in failure to develop a strong "curriculum consciousness" or good understanding of the manner in which the general curriculum wields power over common teaching practices (Pugach and Warner, 1996). The gap between special education's view of its role as the remediator of traditional basic skills and new and emerging conceptions of curriculum that emphasize meaning making such as constructivism, is wide. Even as special educators promote inclusion of students into the general classroom its functionalist and micro-objectivist traditions provide no grounding or philosophical basis for participating in the reform debate (Noland and Francis, 1992). Special education has emphasized finding the deficits in the student but not in the curriculum.

Consistent with its grounding in a medical model of disability, the field has based its relationship to the standard curriculum on a student pathology model which holds that as long as the problem resides within the individual student, efforts to overcome the difficulties need to be focused on the individual and not on the curriculum itself. This individual within-student model continues to be the focus of special education. The mantra of special education is that "with adaptation and individual support suited to the needs of the individual, all students can be successful in achieving the same curriculum goals" (Van Dyke, Stallings, and Colley, 1995).

Refocusing on the general education curriculum as problematic rather than the student as deficit has recently become a topic of discourse in the professional special education community. Some are questioning whether the standard curriculum is designed to foster or squelch the diverse learning needs of students who carry labels of mild disability (Pugach and Warner, 1996). Should special educators teach mildly disabled students the learning strategies and social skills necessary to access the teacher's lessons, even if they are not appropriate or do special educators find radically different routes to accessing what is worth knowing in the curriculum? Pugach and Warner (1996) have framed a dilemma of access to the curriculum and argued that many of the remediation activities special educators engage in are aimed at getting the student access to the teacher's lessons rather than producing any authentic learning outcomes of importance for their students.

3. Transition curriculum as border crossing vs. a developmental journey. The lack of success of special education students beyond their school experience has been well documented in the literature (Camill and D'Amico, 1992). The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) and the National Longitudinal Transition Survey (NLTS) evaluated outcomes for 11 categories of students with disabilities in comparison with nondisabled students. The study focused on youth in the last years of secondary school and in the two years after leaving secondary school and looked at how many young people dropped out of secondary school, the grade levels at which dropouts left, how many of those who dropped out completed general education development (GED) programs, and how many of those who graduated attended postsecondary

schools. The study also examined employment patterns and a measure of social adjustment (the arrest rate). Findings indicated that compared to nondisabled individuals:
(1) more students with disabilities dropped out of secondary school; (2) fewer dropouts with disabilities completed GEDs; (3) fewer graduates with disabilities attended postsecondary schools; (4) fewer youth with disabilities had paying jobs; (5) more employed youth with disabilities worked part-time an din low-status jobs; (6) fewer out-of-school youth with disabilities achieved residential independence; and (7) more youth with disabilities were arrested (Camill and D'Amico, 1992).

The resulting federal mandate for intensified efforts to better prepare students with disabilities for higher quality post-secondary outcomes has helped to pull special education a step closer to the outcome-based context of the general education reform movement. This context is entered on developing citizens that will be able to participate in the economic-job world of the 21st century at the end of formal schooling. According to Kemmis, Cole, and Suggett (1983)

> the rhetoric of transition education is a way of posing certain fundamental problems faced by schools and also a way of subtly imposing a solution to those problems -- but a solution on the boundary between school and society, not within schools or within society (p. vii).

By naming the problem and defining transition as a "border crossing," between formal schooling and the world of work, attention has been focused on the "ends" and not the means to the education program. The rational-organizational response is a focus on the transition between formal school and the world of work and the development of additional bureaucratic forms and procedures rather than an interrogation of the complex and multiple transitions and teaching and learning decisions that are made by teachers as they move through formal school as marginalized students.

The prevailing mechanistic-behavioral paradigm seeks to solve the curricular problems of transition through a focus on isolated skills, task analysis and what Heshusius (1995) has referred to as "the stronger dose" formula where the assumption is made skills and knowledge need to be further broken down into smaller chunks by intensified teaching effort. Transition has become a

"code word" representing inadequacies of special education outcomes. The rhetoric surrounding issues of transition tends to invite a bits-and-pieces and short-lived response school communities where new and poorly understood initiatives are simply added onto existing program frameworks. The rhetoric of transition as problematic creates an image of a problem on the boundaries of school and post-secondary school or employment. It suggested that all that is required is some "fine tuning at the edges of our educational institutions in order to minimize the problem" (Kemmis, et al) .

A critical analysis of the so-called transition problem suggests that it is important to recognize that this issue raises far more fundamental questions about the nature of our education system and society in general. A post-industrial society has radically changed the labor market. The standard accepted knowledge about entry points into the job market are markedly different than what has been predicted by schooling systems which were designed for nineteenth century economic and social structures. The moniker of "transition" does not portray the magnitude of the problem and the range of issues of those "special students" who fail to find appropriate work after schooling. Add-on, short termed transition curricula or programs are an attempt to resort those school leavers who fail to find work after the initial sorting and labeling by the school system. These add-on programs often stress the 'relevance' of activities they embody to post- school life. They involve simulations of real world of work situations and practical applications. Kemmis, et al (1983) see this add-on program approach as "too little too late" and a symptom of a much larger educational problem. They say

> these so-called "relevant" curriculum components are provided to only a certain group in the school. They are a desperate measure to redress the previous inappropriate curriculum experiences that have caused this group to be labeled as being "at risk." Estranged from the regular curriculum by its failure to engage their concerns and interest and classified by process of assessment and selection as unsuited to its demands, these students are then offered basic practical commercial or domestic skill training as if this could recompense them for the years of education they have lost (p. 2).

Clearly a more fundamental reorientation of the education system is required. Increasing numbers

of students have been marginalized and excluded from a high status knowledge curriculum that might have given them some of the skills now sought by entry level employers. By reconstructing the problem as a transition problem both schools and society in general have again, focused the deficit within the student and not on the structure of the system as a whole.

4. A critique of teacher deficit models of curriculum development. Teachers have traditionally been involved in implementing school change initiatives but their voices have historically been denied in initiating or conceptualizing changes. Most change and school reform efforts have not legitimized teacher involvement of this magnitude. Instead, teachers are typically relegated to technician status in implementing others's ideas or "recipes" for change. In a critique of the processes used for educational reform, Giroux (1988) says

> many of the recommendations that have emerged in the current debate either ignore the role teachers play in preparing learners to be active and critical citizens or they suggest reforms that ignore the intelligence, judgment and experience that teachers might offer in such a debate. Where teachers do enter the debate, they are the object of educational reforms that reduce them to the status of high level technicians carrying our dictates and objectives decided by experts far removed from the everyday realities of classroom life. The message appears to be that teachers do not count when it comes to critically examining the nature and process of educational reform (p. 121).

Consequently, involvement in school change generally consists of teacher as audience with staff development models focusing on teachers' acquisition of knowledge and skills. This focus is based on an assumption that transference of knowledge and skills will naturally occur leading to the desired change. There are several problems inherent in this way of thinking about staff development. First, it continues to perpetuate a model that separates the conception of change/reform initiatives from the execution of change/reform initiatives, thus devaluing critical and intellectual work on the part of teachers. This process for facilitating change has created teachers who are more concerned with the "how to," and with a "what works" mentality, rather than engaging teachers in thinking more critically about "why." Focusing on narrow skills leads to further deskilling of teachers, that Apple (1988) defines as a process of taking employees skills and breaking them down into atomistic units, redefining them, and then being appropriated by

management to enhance efficiency and control of the labor process. The process of deskilling often leads to the atrophy of workers' skills since these skills are no longer needed. Another way of critiquing this reality is what Becker (1968, p. 214-215) refers to as "creating structures of evil" which deny persons the opportunity to stage the world so they can act in it creatively as meaning makers.

Teachers haven't been thought of as meaning makers according to Miller (1990), who critiques traditional staff development models as perpetuating underlying assumptions of teacher deficiency with a perception that there is something wrong with teachers that staff development is enlisted to fix. Thus the packaged in-service programs for educational innovation based on prescriptive remedies and packaged answers to alleviate perceived teacher deficiencies in effecting change continue to proliferate. While it is common practice that administrators believe teachers have limited capabilities in conceptualizing change, a dilemma results when teachers themselves come to devalue their own abilities and possibilities to conceptualize school change. This teacher deficit perspective results in a belief that external experts are needed to solve the problems and that expertise about teaching exists beyond the teacher in the classroom.

Goodlad's (1984) study of schools and conditions supporting teacher work had similar findings. In analyzing the conditions under which teachers work, he found the common mode of operation in schools is teacher isolation with little opportunity for rich professional dialogue. He also found that "there was little....to suggest active, ongoing exchanges of ideas and practices across schools, between groups of teachers, or between individuals even in the same schools" (p. 187). Lack of teacher voice, imposed either by others or by teachers themselves is detrimental to the success of educational innovation or change. Sarason (1990) says that teachers do have something to contribute. The problem is they have no forum that gives them voice. Yet, he goes on to say, their daily lives are influenced by decisions made elsewhere.

5. Action research as a viable approach to effecting change. Ruddick (1991, p. 92) asserts that real change will never occur unless teaches understand "at the level of principle,

what they are trying to achieve, why they are trying to achieve it, and how any new possibilities might match the logic of their analysis of the need for change." She critiques traditional models for change processes from the perspective that these models don't allow teachers to have a sense of control over their lives as professionals, but rather result in teachers feeling used and acted upon. However, staff development that is grounded in collaborative inquiry and action research has the potential to affect real and lasting change as it provides teachers opportunities to engage in discourse and arrive at complex understanding of the need for change. Processes such as these enable teachers to make connections between their own beliefs and philosophies of education and the intended outcome of the change/reform efforts being advocated.

Action research has been defined in numerous ways throughout its more than 50 year history (Noffke, 1990; King and Lonnquist, 1995). While the purpose of this paper is not to delineate all these definitions nor give an historical overview of this process, it is important to share the definition which has influenced and shaped the way we practice and teach others how to do action research. Carr and Kemmis (1986) assert that the two essential aims of all action research are to improve and to involve. They say:

> action research aims at improvement in three areas: firstly, the improvement of a practice; secondly, the improvement of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners; and thirdly, the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place. The aim of involvement stands shoulder to shoulder with the aim of improvement. Those involved in the practice being considered are to be involved in the action research process in all its phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (p. 165).

Given this definition then action research becomes much more than a mere problem-solving process to making decisions. It is not formulaic nor simplistic, but rather a process that brings into question one's beliefs, values, and assumptions that guide one's actions in the first place. It is only through questioning these basic assumptions that one has the potential to become transformed in the process of doing action research. Therefore, this necessitates a degree of self-reflection or introspection to bring into question the beliefs that have traditionally influenced and guided one's practice. Through this reflective process, one is able to achieve understanding about practice and

the situation or circumstances in which practice is situated and then consider what changes are necessary. This process is synonymous with praxis.

Consequently, the way that we view action research is that it comprises a process that requires a degree of rigor just as does any standard research process, quantitative as well as qualitative. But in addition to the criterion of rigor, another major criterion is the degree to which self-reflection is a part of the process and the kinds of personal changes that take place as a result of that self-reflection. Therefore, action research is the combination of a process of self-reflection and rigorous research. If either component is missing, e.g. self-reflection but no rigorous research or rigorous research but no self-reflection, we believe the process should not qualify as "action research." The final criterion is the action component -- what action results from gaining an understanding through analyzing a particular situation and engaging in critical self-reflection? In summary, action research that is worthwhile must involve a high degree of rigor in conducting the research, itself, and engage the practitioner in processes of reflection, praxis, and subsequent action.

Research Methodology

As this study focused on multiple goals, multiple research methods were used. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 2), "the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objective reality can never be captured." As the facilitator, I used action research to study and reflect on my own practice in trying to engage others similarly in action research processes. The primary method used to facilitate this process was extensive and continuous personal journaling. This proved to be a powerful method for documenting and learning from my experience as my journal was used to reflect on participants' questions, concerns, and growth throughout the course as well as individual concerns I had regarding my own abilities and growth as a facilitator. According to Robert Yinger and Christopher Clark, quoted by Jeffry Maas (1991)

personal journals are advocated as a means of promoting reflective teaching by

> forcing the writers to learn about what they know, what they feel, what they do (and how they do it), and why they do it.

Journals, that include facts, spontaneous and personal thoughts and feelings, are comprehensive and systematic attempts at writing to clarify ideas and experiences. Journaling facilitates the emergence of patterns or themes in one's work over time. Keeping a professional journal was a means to record my own journey of teaching and growing and a way to assist my probing of the educational and cultural milieus within which these educators' practices were situated.

Other data collection methods included tape-recording and transcribing monthly collaborative inquiry sessions and collecting and analyzing numerous artifacts (i.e., participants' responses to varied class exercises, action research projects and reflection/position papers). The value of documents and artifacts is the fact that they help contribute to the total picture in presenting a more clearly articulated context for the study. They also provide a stimulus for generating questions that can only be pursued through direct observation and interviewing.

Research Findings

In this last section of the paper we share my action research findings regarding the development of a transition curriculum and my role of an external facilitator in that process. We also share evidences of how this action research experience changed teachers' perceptions about research and their role as researchers as well as how this experience transformed teachers' beliefs about students capabilities and roles as learners. Lastly, we conclude this paper with a discussion of the themes regarding transition for special education students that emerged from participants' action research projects and reflections on the outcomes of the course.

1. Curriculum development through action research. I used action research to study and reflect on my own practice as a consultant trying to engage others similarly in action research processes. This was a difficult process, however, as I was continually confronted with predicaments in my role. I could either assist educators in reproducing knowledge through implementing a predetermined or "canned" transition curriculum or I could actively involve them in

constructing curriculum based on reflection and action around transition issues they and their students identified as being critical. This was a frustrating process at times because in addition to teaching them how to conduct action research on their own practice to determine what a transition curriculum should be, my goal was also to raise critical consciousness with them about the limitations of existing transition curricula.

At our first session together I asked participants to reflect on several questions, two of which were: (1) what knowledge, skills, and values do you believe students with special needs should acquire; and (2) what is your understanding of what research is? While the responses to question one included such things as problem-solving, self-advocacy, how to access and use information, high expectations, integrity, and dedication and perseverance there were also responses that indicated negative or lowered expectations of children with special needs. These included such things as know where to pick up the food stamps, know where the SRS office is, as well as the traditional transition skills of personal hygiene, social skills, strong work ethic, budgetary and time management skills, doing laundry, etc.

In response to reflecting on their understanding of research participants included such negative reflections as: confusing statistics that are slanted; talking heads' B.S.; time wasting; dull; useless; a reason to write and sell a book; a reason to appear on Oprah; plagiarism; can be manipulated; tedious; creates pendulum swings; change for researchers pocket; info used to make quacks a fast buck -- or long lasting big bucks; info that should filter down to the peasants and be useful to make things better; mind numbing; boring -- not too much action; and reinventing the wheel. While there were several other kinds of responses -- discovery; a way to learn; scientific approach; documented information used to start change; a way of questioning our basic assumptions; and a closer look at some aspect of life that may otherwise go unexamined -- the negative responses far outweighed the others. After the first session I came to realize the enormity of the task.

Progress toward the goal of questioning the content and process of a transition curriculum

was a bumpy path that resulted in many detours. Some insight into the importance of this was realized during an early session when we invited Eugene Edgar, a professor from the University of Washington to share the kinds of things they were doing in transition. He said they had tried to implement a program that was based on best practice from the research but yet failed miserably attributing this in part to lack of student ownership in their own learning. He said you can tell a student that he/she needs to be self-determined (one of the goals of transition programs), but said telling kids that versus letting them determine it for themselves is the critical point in a transition program.

Despite the readings I assigned and alternative perspectives to which I tried to expose them, a narrow view of transition curriculum seemed to persist as reflected in my journal dated January 12.

> I'm having mixed feelings about the process we're experiencing. Sometimes I wonder if I'm able to help them look more broadly at the whole issue of transition more critically. Some seem to be entrenched in thinking about transition very traditionally. Yet, the primary purpose of transition, in the literature, seems to be to give kids basic employability skills.

When teachers have limited views and expectations of student capabilities regarding knowledge construction, this inevitably influences the content and process of a special education transition curriculum and teachers' interactions with students.

A review of the literature also points out that teachers, who work with special education students, have a very positivistic and behaviorist perspective on learning, generally believing that students with special needs are not capable of making decisions about curriculum choices let alone decisions that will affect life choices. So while I wanted them to look more broadly at the whole notion of transition sometimes I initially felt it was an uphill battle due to the way the transition literature and conventional wisdom generally referred to the goals of transition. I believed through action research, however, teachers would come to question their own cultural constructions of special education students and critique existing transition curriculum and the deficit perspective from which many of these programs are based.

While we often debated the content and process of a transition curriculum, we experienced a turning point at our fifth session when we invited David Considine, a professor from Appalacian State University to facilitate a discussion on critical media literacy. His presentation became the impetus for many of the participants to think how they might assist their students in becoming more critical of the media. This discussion also spurred some to question what other kinds of skills were necessary for students to attain in a transition curriculum. At the end of this particular session one of the participants said that the class should be called "transitioning teachers" and not "transitioning students" because she believed that in order for the latter to occur successfully, it was first important that teachers reflect more critically on their own beliefs, values, and assumptions about what transition means.

Situating my action research in a critical theory paradigm enabled me to reflect on how I could give teachers opportunities to have voice in negotiating both the process and content of this professional development experience. I believed that if I modeled for them what negotiation looks like, it would be an impetus for them to likewise negotiate curriculum with their own students. Bringing in David Considine had been an example of negotiating with them the content of our monthly sessions and trying to model what responsiveness to their needs as learners should look like.

At our third session in December I engaged participants in a discussion about autonomy and choice. I began this discussion by having them relate their own feelings of being told what to do, how to do it as professionals, and how that made them feel. I said,

> the point that I want to make is, you know how you feel as professionals if somebody said this is the goal and this is the lock step way you're going there. What about with kids? Can't we have outcomes for kids and let kids choose alternative ways to get there?...You resist if people tell you and if you're being completely controlled on how to do it. Aren't there ways to help kids get there, but let them choose the way they want to get there?

There was resistance to giving students opportunities to choose as indicative in the following responses: "But you don't get to choose when you're on the job. Our society -- what's the point?

You do not choose. Not very often do you get to choose what you're going to do on the job." Another retorted, "There's got to be perimeters. We're talking about kids, we're not talking about adults." My questioning then continued, "I know, but if kids never experience that, how are they going to know to do it when they get to be adults?" to which a participant said, "That comes from maturation."

I had concerns throughout that we might not be able to accomplish our goals as indicated in a journal entry that I thought we didn't have a sense of direction or that people weren't getting the point. I shared with course participants that as a facilitator of their learning I sometimes had sleepless nights wondering is we'd all arrive at the same point. I had reflected in my journal

> I think I know the end point but I don't know how we're going to get there because a process of giving students' ownership isn't always clear or necessarily cut and dried. It's quite the opposite -- it creates much uncertainty and doubt in the mind of the educator/facilitator. Even intuitively if you believe you are on the right track there is a feeling of skepticism which lurks around every bend in the journey.

In addition to issues of ownership I wanted teachers to see the value of an action research process for curriculum development as well as professional growth. But a problem that kept emerging was how others, especially those in positions of power, perceived the relevance or legitimacy of teachers researching their practice. At our third session, one teacher commented

> I've been working with a student now for two years and a social worker came to my classroom and said, "Wow, has this kid changed!" And my boss said, "Yeah, but have you documented that?" Well, and it's like, if somebody walks into a room and says this kid's changed, obviously there's some stuff going on, but you've got to have data."

There was a general feeling among the group that journaling about reflections of students' growth was not considered valid data, as one said, "But that would not be data that would be acceptable to the co-op (the special education cooperative)." We then talked about the possibilities of action research comprising a process that could have impact on rethinking the ways that student progress was documented -- that action research could be an impetus for changing a system of reporting procedures -- that the potential was there. Consequently, one of the goals of our action research project was to expose participants to the potential and possibilities that emerge from a process that

ultimately frees teachers from conventional wisdom about procedures and practices of schooling.

At future sessions participants continued their discussion of ways that action research could be legitimized as a process for teacher evaluation as well as professional growth. One teacher suggested

> what if teachers went to the table saying, "We would like to do action research. Every year, we would like to identify something in our classroom. We would like to, at the end of the year look at the results of that." That could be our performance evaluation....An individual evaluation doesn't show that. Somebody coming in to look at you for one hour a couple of times a year. What if teachers voluntarily said this is what we want to do. Think of the power that we'd have.

Discussion then turned to what this would like and how to bring it about. Another continued

> I think what she's talking about is a completely different mind set. And this is not the mind set that teachers as a big group have traditionally had. There's been one here and one there who's done it, of course they were swimming up stream. I mean it's just, it's very empowering. It's amazing, for teachers would take their own power and say this is how we're going to do it, and we have done the work, we know exactly what's required, we know how we're going to do it. We believe in this and carry forth from there. I think it'd be astonishing to see that happen... it would be like an amazing event.

Concerns were raised regarding time and commitment. One participant indicated

> It does represent more work....They have to get basically radicalized to see their own powers. And then they see education and their role in it in a completely different way. But the way it's structured now, it's just kind of generation by generation in wake of all that past experience prevents teachers from being able to make that. Just like empowering a kid in your classroom. Once they get turned on, once they become empowered, there's no stopping.

One woman said, "There has to be some kind of administrative commitment to having an action research project that didn't work. Not getting negative..." Others agreed. But then one commented, "I don't even know that your action research project has to be evaluated....every year we should go in and critically look at some part of what we're doing and really examine it." Another teacher added

> And have the chance to sit down and talk about it with other people in our building. You can say, "Here's what I'm doing, what do you think? Does this sound OK to you? Well, have you thought about this? Well, no I haven't." And then you go back and you'll meet again next month and talk about it again.

In discussing the pros and cons of the present teacher evaluation system one participant

indicated that she believed the most important thing teachers can do is to research their practice and that teachers were being evaluated on the wrong kinds of things. She said, "Doing research as teachers is what professional development should be about -- not how many bulletin boards you have created in your classroom." Not all agreed with her, however, with one participant asking what if bulletin boards was what your administrator was evaluating you on? She responded

> that's not the point of an empowering kind of action research. Who cares what the bulletin boards look like. That's the kind of mentality you've got to get away from as to what a teacher's job is in the school.

When the person who made the comment about the bulletin boards replied, "OK, if that's the goal you want to set, then that's what's important to you. And what is action research, but what's important to you." She came back with, "Well, I suppose the point is that's the kind of thing that can not be important to us." She continued

> But, I think in terms of empowering adults in the classroom, things like are your desks neatly in rows, is everything up off the floor, do you have neat bulletin boards is where we have been coming from and that's what we need to get away from.

When she was queried what were the things that mattered and were worthy of researching she responded

> I'm talking about how I'm going to get my kids to be better readers? How am I going to get them to be responsible adults? How am I going to teach them about media literacy? That's where the action research becomes truly empowering, because it changes what you do and how you deal with kids on a basic level. Not the cosmetic level like how many books in the library, which is how schools used to be evaluated.

While I believe that we were making progress toward accomplishing my three goals of (1) questioning our beliefs, values, and assumptions of special education students and content of a transition curriculum; (2) examining ways to give kids ownership in their own learning; and (3)

pondering the value of action research to curriculum and professional development, doubts continued to linger in the back of my mind. While I know inroads were made with some of the participants, I didn't feel we were all yet on the same page. At our final course session on April 29 I reflected in my journal

> Our final session is today. I'm wondering if we all accomplished enough. As the facilitator this has been a tough experience for me as well. It's difficult to give up control because the fear is will we all accomplish what needs to be accomplished? How do I negotiate a curriculum process, give up control, but at the same time attend to everyone's needs -- those that want more structure and those that want more flexibility?
>
> How can I assess from early on learning styles, needs of learners and yet encourage those who want or need structure to give up that need? Is structure a result of socialization? If I give into it am I perpetuating a dependent learning style? How do I best encourage growth as a facilitator?

At that final session I had course participants generate a list of criteria to critique action research which they in turn used to critique their own action research projects. One insightful thing that occurred at that meeting was teachers referring to themselves as researchers and talking about the value of engaging in a research process, themselves. This was enlightening given the fact that many had had negative reactions to research initially and had expressed numerous doubts about their own roles in conducting research throughout the course. Criteria that were generated included:

1. Did it make a difference?
2. Is it a self-selected reflection on your own practice?
3. Does it include a sense of context: a description of yourself, the subjects, and the setting (what, who, where)?
4. Is the methodology used stated (with examples of instruments, if applicable)?
5. Is it relevant to the researcher?
6. Does it include a narrative analysis of the study (i.e., a personal journey, anecdotal)?
7. Does it describe how outside influences/obstacles impacted the study/process?
8. Did it contribute to personal/professional knowledge?
9. Is it well written?
10. Does it have a closure or draw conclusions; address future impact or further research?

The first year culminated in a teacher research conference where course participants shared results of their action research with State Board of Education personnel, university professors, local administrators, and other teachers who had been invited to attend. While I believe some of

the course participants were initially a little hesitant and skeptical about sharing their research, just watching them and listening to the educational discourse in the room that evening was a sight to behold. Everyone from the class was involved and seemed very eager to share their findings. It seemed that we had all finally arrived!

2. Ways in which action research changed teacher's beliefs about their roles as teachers. By the end of the 1994/95 school year participants starting to see themselves as researchers. When participants were queried about their perceived value of action research and how it had impacted their own belief systems regarding curriculum and assessment and teaching and learning, one participant responded

> action research has helped me to question everything I do -- it has helped me shift from content-based curriculum to process-based curriculum, from teacher and textbook driven instruction to the teacher as a facilitator of learning, from teaching isolated content to teaching integrated skills, from an emphasis on student memorization to an emphasis on student application, and from standardized assessment to using multiple assessments.

Responses from other participants included: "through action research I learned the value of recognizing a problem, noting my impressions of the problem, and then affecting a strategy to address the problem;" "action research forces a teacher to take action;" "action research helps me to think about what I do as a teacher, why I do it, and what impact it has on my students;" "it has helped me gain insights into what my students' day-to-day experiences are and the effect of these experiences on their ability or desire to perform at school; " and "action research has enabled me to reflect about what really counts in education."

When participants were asked if they saw a difference in themselves as educators as a result of their experience in collaborative action research the majority responded that it had. The kinds of changes some reflected about included personal attributes of being a teacher. One said the course had enabled her to become more reflective about her own work with students. She commented, "While I am somewhat reflective by nature, this has given me a framework to use the reflection in a way to guide my practice rather than just mulling things over." Another responded that her involvement in the course gave her more confidence as a teacher in saying

> I believe I can figure out how to teach kids and don't need to rely on outside experts. I am learning to relinquish control of kids' learning and instead sit back and see what happens. I no longer believe I always have to know what to do next.

And another participant said

> I like the idea that I can be trusted to make intelligent decisions about teaching. I never felt I knew enough but now I believe I am just as much an expert as anyone else.

One teacher indicated changes in her perceptions about her level of responsibilities and role her role as a BD teacher. She said

> I have learned so much this year. I felt my role was primarily behavioral but I am also responsible academically and I did not realize that was my secondary responsibility. Amazing.

Four of the course participants indicated that their involvement had not made any appreciable difference in their role as teachers. One said

> I like to think that I have an open mind and am willing to try new techniques. If anything, this has validated some of my previous conceptions about teachers as the key and primary source of change in the area of education.

Another commented, "I've always maintained the attitude that an educator needs to examine his practices. This course reaffirmed that belief." While one teacher admitted that she felt a need to engage in research, she commented, "I don't or can't find the time I need or want to do this research."

3. Ways in which action research changed teachers's beliefs about students. One teacher's project focused on the necessity for teachers to take time to get to know their students and understand how the changing lifestyle of students affects their school lives. He says without this understanding teachers may mistakenly attribute students's lack of achievement to such things as apathy, when in fact, such might not be the case at all. Through his research he came to understand his students and his own negative feelings and reactions towards his students's behaviors that he believed interfered initially with his ability to reach them and engage them in meaningful learning. As a result of his research, he planned to adapt his curriculum to more effectively meet their real needs; he planned to refocus his efforts to better aid his students who are

not planning to continue their education beyond high school. He concluded his study in saying, "it is time that we as an institution take a long, hard look at our educational system and see if we are helping our students or if we are hindering them through some act of omission."

Other teachers remarked that the course had changed their attitudes toward their students. One said that she found differences in her attitude in two areas: (1) giving more decision making power to the students in choosing their own curriculum content and materials and looking at transition and what activities truly help; and (2) developing more of a plan with feedback processes. Another responded that she was, "beginning to look at things from a different point of view." She continued, " I try to look at student needs and learning rather than teacher needs and presentation. I am trying to ask students what kinds of skills they think they need, rather than just covering the things I think they need". One teacher indicated that her attitude towards students had not changed in saying, "I've always given students a part of class decisions. Listening to them is important. I didn't know how I would teach otherwise. I do, and have, journaled as a means of documentation."

4. Reflection on outcomes of this course. After reading participants' final research projects an analysis of these indicated that we had reached our goals, at least to some degree. Themes throughout many of the papers were indicative of allowing students more ownership in determining the content of their curriculum, making curricula more relevant to the needs of students, and teachers engaging in more critical and reflective analysis of the teaching/learning process, especially questioning traditional conceptions of transition and special education curriculum. Following is a synthesis of the papers, focusing on the issues, questions and concerns that each raised.

1. Teachers need to be responsive to the connection that kids make between the content that is taught and how they view things as important and real in their own world. An important aspect of teaching is teachers being more responsive to their students, in understanding how they learn and view learning.

2. Children learn through the kinds of behaviors they see teachers modeling. If teachers want to assist others to change their behaviors this will require teachers to

critically reflect on their own patterns of behavior. The ways in which teachers use language to punish and reward children has powerful impacts (negative and positive) on children.

3. Teachers should be cognizant of the life realities of their students and analyze how those realities impact student learning. Teaching needs to be about putting the needs of students first rather than teachers' needs. Education is not preparation for life, but rather life itself -- therefore it should be about day-to-life experiences.

4. If students are given more responsibility for their own learning -- the more control they have, the more responsible they will become.

5. Research has shown that fostering competitiveness and teacher control leads to high truancy rates for children with special needs. If teachers use multi-modal interventions, this will increase the probability for student success. Teachers need to help students see how current course work connects to future goals.

6. It is the responsibility of the teacher to provide a successful learning environment for students. This entails allowing students to have a key role in their own learning.

7. Classroom teachers and special education teachers each have different perceptions of the role of special education teachers in the classroom. While classroom teachers feel it is primarily to control and manage BD students, special education teachers report that the majority of their services are academic in nature. Questions that need to be considered include: (1) is the academic setting problematic for the child; (2) how can the behavior component be better integrated with the academic; (3) could the number of BD students be lessened if teachers were more responsive to meeting kid's needs and learning if teachers were more responsive to meeting kid's needs and making learning more relevant; and (4) how can all teachers be more kind and more gentle with BD students? Would that make a difference?

8. Any discussion of transition needs to include an honest appraisal of why these students are labeled in the first place and haw teachers need to respond to them differently. Maybe the concern needs to be about how to change schools instead of changing kids. A mentality exists as educators that we need t change kids instead of reflecting on our own behaviors which may be perpetuating problems with kids in the first place.

9. While it is the teachers' responsibility to facilitate successful transition, the student needs to play a role in helping develop their plan, implementing the plan, and providing feedback concerning the plan.

10. Is lack of student motivation related to the fact that kids don't feel a sense of ownership in their own learning?

11. In surveying employers, one teacher found that employers want employees who report to work on time, follow work schedules, display dedication and motivation, are team members (display a group effort), desire to learn, are cooperative, and display appropriate work site behavior. The lowest ranking skill was communicating their own ideas clearly. Many of these behaviors are

compliance-type behaviors. Employees who are independent thinkers seem to be less valued. Contradictions seem to emerge between the literature that says employers want problem-solvers and critical thinkers with the kinds of compliance behavior requirements exposed in this survey.

12. In surveying middle school children a response from students showed a high incidence of students feeling powerless about their own education or input -- having no sense of control. That raises the question that maybe certain prerequisite conditions need to be in place in order for students to feel a sense of ownership, to be motivated, and to feel a sense of control over their own learning and lives.

13. Special education students are capable of determining what their own needs are. Perhaps the best way to teach decision making is to allow students to practice decision making in giving them a sense of control over the curriculum and their own learning. Perhaps the role of the teacher should be teaching kids how to clarify values regarding those decisions.

14. How do we resolve the dilemma of giving kids ownership and control over their learning and teachers' sense of self-worth being caught up in education practices which maintain control over the learning environment? How can we teach others to become self-directed learners when teachers want to maintain a sense of control over learning?

15. In working with special education children, those that are labeled BD, pet facilitated therapy can be successfully used to diffuse these children's emotional outbursts. Pet facilitated therapy seems to allow BD children an opportunity to process negative behaviors. If children can control their emotional outbursts and feel a better sense of self-esteem, perhaps they will perform better academically. Pet facilitated therapy has social and emotional significance for BD students.

16. Maybe as adults, a lesson can be learned from pet facilitated therapy in working with BD children. Animals have unconditional acceptance of children with special needs. How can humans be more unconditionally accepting and understanding of children with special needs, as well Animals display caring behaviors. How can schools be more caring -- how can we create schools as caring communities?

While it had been the original goal of the grant, funding this project, to develop a transition curriculum using SCANS as a framework, a comparison of SCANS competencies and skills to participants' action research project outcomes reveals similar results. The following tables (2 and 3) compare and contrast the kinds of skills and competencies SCANS advocates and the skills and competencies for a transition curriculum identified in participants' action research projects. In comparing and contrasting these two tables it is quite evident that when teachers, just as students, have ownership in conceptualizing and determining curriculum content and processes, they will accomplish the necessary intended goals and outcomes. An action research process, such as that

we used, however, is one that validates and honors their voice rather than one that dictates to them what and how they should teach.

Table 2
SCANS Fundamental Workplace Skills

Basic Skills	Thinking Skills	Personal Qualities
Reading	Reasoning	Responsibility
Writing	Making decisions	Self esteem
Speaking	Thinking critically	Sociability
Listening	Solving Problems	Self-management
Knowing mathematics calculations	Seeing things in the minds eye	Integrity
Mathematics concepts	Knowing how to learn	Honesty

Table 3
Transition Curriculum Competencies and Skills

Basic Skills	Thinking Skills	Personal Qualities
Reading	Thinking creatively	Responsibility
Writing	Making decisions	Self esteem
Performing arithmetic and mathematical operations	Solving problems	Sociability
Listening	Visualizing	Self-management
Speaking	Knowing how to Learn	Integrity
	Reasoning	Honesty

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